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ABSTRACT

University libraries, and specifically the University of South Florida (USF) Library, are used for many different purposes that go beyond traditional library services. Activities users engage in while in the library should factor into decisions regarding the allocation of library space or expenditure of resources. The results of this survey illustrate how patrons are using the USF Library building on a daily basis. The anonymous, self-administered exit survey was administered for one week during two separate semesters. Users exiting the library building were given the opportunity to fill out a survey form. Data collected through this questionnaire, along with daily library gate counts, were analyzed to determine overall use patterns of the library facility and use patterns by specific groups of patrons (faculty, students, staff, and non-USF users). A copy of the questionnaire is appended. (Author/MES)

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Surveying User Activity As a Tool For Space Planning in an Academic Library

Abstract

University libraries, and specifically the USF Library are used for many different purposes that go beyond traditional library services. Activities users engage in while in the library should factor into decisions regarding the allocation of library space or expenditure of resources. The results of the survey illustrate how patrons are using the USF Library building on a daily basis.

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The advent of new technologies used to deliver library services has directly affected the usage patterns of academic libraries and the libraries are now being used in ways that go beyond traditional services and functions. With the influx of new technologies, the services and spaces provided by academic libraries are moving closer to those services provided by campus computing departments. These services include access to the Internet, e-mail, online course materials, word processing and other software applications. At the same time, libraries are still being used in traditional ways, for research and study purposes. Ruth Pearson and Joan Rapp noted that "all academic libraries function in three ways that significantly affect space considerations: (1) as repositories and dissemination points for scholarly information, (2) as gathering places for members of the campus community, particularly students, and (3) as study and research facilities."[1] The library is increasing becoming a technological center of the University, partnering with other university departments and units to offer services and facilities. The library as "place" has been a prevailing theme in library literature, perhaps as a reminder that despite growing amounts of technology in libraries, "the library remains a place and not a virtual reality. People continue to come to seek out the library as a haven for study, research, and contemplation. Traditional library functions are changing, but relatively slowly. New technologies are affecting libraries incrementally, rather than in a revolutionary way". [2]

William G. Jones observed that the reemergence of the library as the center of intellectual life on campus and the changing ways that people work with information and with each other have given spaces devoted to people a new importance.[3] Academic libraries must

acknowledge and respond to the challenge of these multiple functions (technological, scholarly and social) by creating spaces that will ensure that all these activities can take place. Libraries must strive to balance all these factors when making space related decisions.

Any decisions with respect to space planning in the library should take the use of the facilities by library users into consideration. The question that we needed answered was "How are patrons using the University of South Florida Tampa Library's physical facility on a daily basis"? It is a given that the library is being heavily used, evidenced by gate counts and circulation statistics, but the challenge was to determine what users were doing while at the library, given the myriad of possible activities. Once clear use patterns are identified, decisions can be made regarding the allocation, design and arrangement of existing library space.

The University of South Florida Tampa Library was designed and built in the mid-1970's, when the words "technology" and "library" were rarely used in the same sentence. Over the last 15 years, the library has been gradually losing seating and study space, due to both the growing collection as well as the installation of computers, printers and other equipment.

The number of patrons visiting the USF Tampa Library has undergone a slow decline over the past five years. Not coincidently, that decline has occurred at the same time that the USF Libraries launched an ambitious virtual library project, making scores of

resources and many traditional library services available to users remotely from their desktop. Even with the growing collection of resources and the plethora of services available online, the library had nearly one million users pass through the front door in 1999/2000, down approximately 10% from the year before. The number of users asking reference questions has remained steady over the years, and those statistics are anticipated to increase in the future, as reference services become available in the online environment, through technologies such as real-time chat software and e-mail reference service. Book circulation has remained relatively steady over the past five years, with a sharp decline of 22% in 1999/2000. This is likely due to the amount and availability of information on the Internet, through library databases and electronic journals. One can only speculate about the impact that electronic books with have on circulation of materials from the library. Overall, the library remains a busy, heavily trafficked building on the USF campus. However, we believe that the nature of the activities that users are engaged in while in the library is changing. In order to give the librarians a snapshot of what the users were actually doing in the library, a user survey was developed.

Methodology

The first step to designing the survey was to decide how to easily and simply ask users what they did in the library that day. We were convinced that the survey should be short, concise and not require any more than a few moments for the user to complete. An exit survey, in the form of a one-page questionnaire, was administered for a period of one week during both spring and fall semesters of 2000. In the spirit of simplicity, the survey asked the library user only two questions. The first question asked the user to identify

which user group they belong to (faculty, staff, student, non-university affiliate). The second question asked the user to identify what activities they engaged in during their visit to the USF Library that day. The survey included a checklist of possibilities, such as received research assistance, checked out a book, used a computer, met with friends, studied, etc. The blank survey forms (see the Appendix for a copy of the survey instrument) were placed on a table near the exit, ensuring that all library users were given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire, regardless of status or affiliation with the university.

Data collected through this questionnaire, along with statistics including library gate counts, reference questions and materials circulated were analyzed to determine overall use patterns of the library facility and use patterns by specific groups of patrons (faculty, students, staff and non-affiliate users).

One interesting side note to the actual administration of the survey was that when staff members were situated at the survey table, the number of users that stopped to fill out the survey was actually lower than when the survey table was left unattended by staff. Perhaps users felt intimidated by having a staff member there. One can only speculate.

Discussion

393 surveys were completed over a one week period during Spring semester 2000 and 183 were completed during a one week period in Fall semester 2000 for a total of 576 surveys. Of the 576 surveys, 58% of the survey respondents were undergraduates

enrolled at the university, 24% of the respondents were graduate students enrolled at the university, 6% were faculty or staff members, and 8% of the respondents were library users not affiliated with the university. The survey asked the non-affiliates to describe themselves. The non-affiliate respondents included students from local schools, community users, alumni, and other visitors to the university. 4% of the respondents did not identify their status.

The activities users engaged in fell into three general categories: 1) activities that are identified as being traditionally associated with libraries; 2) activities associated with computing and general computer use, and 3)activities that were social in nature. The majority of respondents reported that they engaged in "traditional" library activities, including individual and group study, retrieving and checking out library materials, getting assistance or instruction from a librarian or library staff member, and using library materials in a specific collection (government documents, special collections, reserves, etc). The second category involved the use of computers and computer programs, but not for the purposes of accessing library materials or doing library research. These activities included use of library computers to access e-mail, the Internet, class registration, word processing and students seeking technical support. General social activities made up the third category and included meeting friends, using the restroom, or just taking a break and enjoying the quiet if the library.

One notable pattern the survey revealed was that different categories of users (undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty) reported that they used the library in

very different ways. Undergraduate students responses indicated the activity they most often engaged in while in the library was individual study, followed by meeting classmates and friends and third, using the library computers to access the Internet, e-mail and software applications. Graduate students also reported that the activity that they most often engaged was individual study. Using the library's Virtual Library website and using library computers to access the Internet and e-mail were the second and third, respectively.

Faculty respondents reported that the activities they most often engaged in were checking out books, using media, getting assistance from a librarian or staff member and using the Virtual Library website. Most faculty members have access to the Virtual Library website from their office computers and utilize dial-up access from off campus, so it is likely that they do much of their library research from locations outside the library and come to the library facility when they need to either retrieve materials or ask for assistance.

Non-affiliate user activities were led by individual study, using library computers to access the Internet and using the Virtual Library website. This is likely due to the library being open to the public and allowing general public access to both the print and electronic collections. The University of South Florida Tampa Library owns an extensive collection of electronic and print materials not available at public, school or other local academic libraries . Licensing restrictions with vendors prohibit users not affiliated with the university from accessing most proprietary databases from outside the library.

Conclusion

Academic libraries need recognize their role and place in the landscape of the university. No longer are they simply a warehouse for materials or a place for quiet study and contemplation. The campus library has always been and remains a place where the university community gathers for study, for research and for interaction. Academic libraries also need to embrace their new role as a technological and communication center of the university.

When considering reorganization or redesign of existing library space, it is important to consider the types and levels of user activities. From their activities, we can see that library users need spaces for study, research and instruction, access to the library's physical and electronic collections, ample computing facilities and a place for meeting and socializing. Academic libraries should embrace the challenge of providing these spaces and services. By using innovative methods, such as partnerships with other university units and departments, including computing services and student affairs. This will only serve to keep the library as the "heart" of the university, where it belongs.

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Appendix

Who are you?
_____ USF Undergraduate Student
_____ USF Graduate Student
_____ USF Faculty or Staff
_____ Other (please specify) _____

What did you do while in the library today?
(Check all that apply)

_____ Individual Study

_____ Group Study

_____ Used the circulating collection

_____ Checked out a book

_____ Met with a friend/colleague

_____ Picked up interlibrary loan materials

_____ Got help from a librarian

_____ Used Media/videos/tapes/cds

_____ Used a computer to access the internet/get email

_____ Went to a computer lab

_____ Went to Academic Computing

_____ Used Government Documents

_____ Used journals/magazines/newspapers

_____ Used materials in Special Collections

_____ Used the Children's Collection

_____ Used the reference collection

_____ Used reserve materials

_____ Attended an instruction session

_____ Used theVirtual Library

_____ Used the restroom

_____ Other (please specify) _____

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